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(Some) Jews Against Obama

During the past few months a small group of neoconservative Jews, many of whom hold key positions in the world of official Jewish institutions, have been working to undermine the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama with a series of carefully planted character assassinations and deliberately misleading innuendo. I noticed this trend when Debra Feuer, a counsel for the American Jewish Committee, sent a confidential memo to her counterparts at other organizations criticizing Obama's views on the Middle East, Iran and Syria and attacking him for having once appeared at a fundraiser headlined by the late Edward Said. The memo, reported by the *Forward*, was immediately disowned, but not denied, by AJC executive director David Harris.

Also throwing his hatchet into the ring was Morton Klein, who heads up the Likud-loving Zionist Organization of America, complaining that "Barack Obama doesn't understand the continuing Arab war against Israel" and terming the notion of an Obama presidency "frightening." He was joined by Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice president of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the umbrella group that professes to speak for all American Jews. Hoenlein told the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* that Obama's talk of "change" could prove "an opening for all kinds of mischief" and gave voice to what he termed "a legitimate concern over the zeitgeist around the campaign." The Tennessee Republican Party issued a news release noting what it claimed was "a growing chorus of Americans concerned about the future of the nation of Israel, the only stable democracy in the Middle East, if Sen. Barack Hussein Obama is elected president of the United States."

Let us note first of all that, like every American politician for the past half-century or so with nondelusional presidential aspirations, Obama views the crisis of Israel/Palestine largely through an Israeli lens. He asserts that he would not even be in politics at all were it not for the support he has enjoyed from his local Jewish community. He called Israel one of "our most important allies" and added, "I think that its security is sacrosanct and that the United States has a special relationship with Israel, as I myself do with the Jewish community."

Thanks in part to statements like those, the neoconnish campaign against Obama was not able to gain much traction. Perhaps as a consequence, as the *Forward* has editorialized, "the attacks on Obama have metastasized into a wide-ranging assault on his associations." These attacks, as blogger Matthew Yglesias notes, have largely amounted to the following: "First Obama was an anti-Semite because Zbigniew Brzezinski is an anti-Semite. Then Obama was an anti-Semite because Robert Malley is an anti-Semite. And now according to [Commentary's Noah] Pollack it's Samantha Power who's tainted by Jew-hatred."

The surrogate slurs have come from many sources. Writing on AmericanThinker.com, right-wing blogger Ed Lasky argued that Malley, an Obama adviser and former Clinton national security official, "represents the next generation of anti-Israel activism." CAMERA, the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America, took this a step further by investigating Malley's roots and declaring that "Malley's parents were rabidly anti-Israel" and that Malley's articles on Middle East issues "demonize Israel only slightly less than his father." This is nonsense, naturally. Former National Security Adviser Sandy Berger and former State Department officials Dennis Ross, Martin Indyk, Aaron David Miller and Daniel Kurtzer, all of whom worked with Malley, signed a letter denouncing "a series of vicious personal attacks" against him. Regarding the much admired Ms. Power, neocon foreign policy wonk Max Boot has taken his colleague Pollack to task for his misleading attack on her views in *Commentary's* blog "Contentions," where the attacks originally appeared.

According to a report in *Newsweek*, Ann Lewis, a senior adviser to Hillary Clinton, made reference during a conference call with Jewish leaders to Brzezinski, whom she falsely labeled Obama's "chief foreign policy adviser." (In fact, according to Brzezinski, he has advised Obama on a total of one occasion.) While Brzezinski did anger some Jews with his endorsement of the controversial Walt/Mearsheimer book, his views are not only well within the foreign policy mainstream; they are also completely consistent with those expressed by a majority of American Jews—far more so than those hawks who profess to speak in their name.

In a remarkably stupid line of questioning during the final Democratic debate, Tim Russert demanded over and over that Obama reject Louis Farrakhan's kind words for him so that Jews might feel a bit more comfortable with him. (In fact, according to exit polls, Obama has beaten Clinton among Jewish voters in California, Connecticut and Massachusetts, while she has bested him in New York, New Jersey and Maryland.) When Obama decided to indulge Russert and "reject and denounce" Farrakhan, Russert kept up his lunatic line of questioning by demanding that Obama reject Russert's misstated version of his Protestant minister's views as well.

What is it that these neocons and their media mouthpieces really fear about an Obama presidency? Perhaps it is honesty about the issue. Speaking to a largely Jewish audience in Cleveland, Obama explained, "There is a strain within the pro-Israel community that says unless you adopt an unwavering pro-Likud approach to Israel, you're anti-Israel and that can't be the measure of our friendship with Israel." Then came his kicker: "One of the things that struck me when I went to Israel was how much more open the debate was around these issues in Israel than they are sometimes here in the United States." No wonder he scares them so... ■



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